



## Feed the Future Country Fact Sheet

Online Version:

<http://feedthefuture.gov/article/passion-changing-lives-empowering-women-hivaids-through-passion-fruit-farming>

## A Passion for Changing Lives: Empowering Women with HIV/AIDS through Passion Fruit Farming



USAID/Kenya

Irine Zippy Kalamai inspects the grafted passion fruit seedlings at her group's nursery.

*The following is a guest blog post by Irine Zippy Kalamai, founder of the Chepterit Horticultural Growers Organization in Nandi County, Kenya.*

I'll always remember the first case of AIDS that I saw. It was almost twenty years ago. I had been working as a nurse in rural Kenya for a very long time.

There are many myths and superstitions surrounding HIV/AIDS. Some people even believe that the disease is a hex cast by a neighbor through witchcraft. This misinformation can make it difficult for us to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS, combat the effects of stigma facing people living with HIV/AIDS, or even advise people on the proper diet to boost their immune systems.

When I was transferred to work as a nurse in Nandi County in 1998, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in that area was about seven percent. Women who had lost their husbands to AIDS sometimes resorted to prostitution, further spreading the disease. As a result, we saw a lot of orphaned children.

At that time, antiretroviral drugs that are used to boost immunity against HIV had just been introduced to Kenya. Most people living with HIV were reluctant to take the drugs. They had seen or experienced the side effects of the antiretroviral drugs that are similar to those of drugs used to treat cancer – they made people feel worse. Without a proper balanced diet, the effects of the antiretroviral drugs had little impact in boosting people's immune systems.

As a nurse, I recognized a dire need to improve how and what people in my community were eating. I was constantly trying to educate people on how important it is to eat a healthy and balanced diet. But it is difficult to eat a balanced diet without a regular income.

At the same time that I was working as a nurse, passion fruit farming had just begun here in Nandi County, and I was interested in growing it myself. It was always my routine to spend the first hour of the day on my farm before going to work at the clinic. Eventually, I visited a farm that taught people how to grow and nurture passion fruit seedlings, and it suddenly occurred to me that I could hit two birds with one stone: I could help others generate income while educating them on how to use better nutrition to combat HIV/AIDS.

I started to train people how to grow passion fruits, dedicating a third of my small piece of land specifically to my newfound

project. I used the training to encourage people to get tested for HIV and to take the antiretroviral drugs. By teaching them to grow passion fruit, I was helping them generate income so they had some money to improve their diet.

I founded the Chepterit Horticultural Growers Organization to empower women living with HIV/AIDS through passion fruit and vegetable farming. Our group focuses on passion fruit because it yields so much on such small pieces of land. Passion fruit can also be intercropped, which means you can grow it at the same time and on the same land as a second crop. And passion fruit provides necessary vitamins that help supplement the diet with nutrients necessary to fight off diseases.

As a nurse, I knew about the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and its work in the clinics to provide antiretroviral drugs, get people tested for HIV/AIDS, and help us raise awareness about the disease in our community. So when I started the Chepterit Horticultural Growers Organization, I was not surprised to learn about a Feed the Future project supported by USAID that was providing information on agricultural innovations, like soil testing and drip irrigation technologies.

Through the U.S. Government's support, our group received nets to keep out the insects that always invade the farms during the rainy season, and we were able to connect with Kenya's Ministry of Agriculture. By selling high-quality passion fruit seedlings, we have been able to expand beyond the local market and sell our crops to buyers in other parts of the country. Some of our buyers are from as far as Kakamega in Western Kenya!

Now we have members living with HIV who can afford school uniforms for their children. We have widows who can afford to support their children to continue beyond primary to secondary school. In addition to learning about better nutrition, some members are even using their income to supplement their diet with fish, even though it is not a traditional staple food in Nandi County. The knowledge we've gained about both health and agriculture means we won't lose another generation to AIDS in Kenya.

*In 2006 Irine Zippy Kalamai was awarded the Head of State Commendation by the President of Kenya, His Excellency Mwai Kibaki, for championing the introduction of antiretroviral drugs in rural Kenya.*

- [Read a highlight of the Chepterit Horticultural Growers Organization on the ONE Campaign website](#)
- [Read a message from World Food Program Executive Director Ertharin Cousin on World AIDS Day](#)